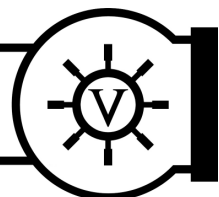


This is a Story You Will Never Read

Cynewulf

PONY FICTION VAULT



I have sat, waiting, for somepony to watch.

It's not the most fun I've ever had, but it's not nearly as boring as others might think. Rainbow wouldn't stay still nearly long enough, for sure. Rarity would want to fill the watching with gossip. Fluttershy wouldn't say a word, but she wouldn't understand. Pinkie would be... Pinkie. Applejack... honestly, I'm not sure. She might not like it.

I wonder where my friends are as I wait in the corner of the cafe.

The Inkblot is a pretty good place. The music coming out of the new speakers up in the corner of the room is soft, and the coffee is good. I'd know—I've been Ponyville's premiere caffeine addict since I moved in. Usually, I'm fine with what I can make at home. But sometimes you just want somepony else to make you an overpriced coffee drink.

For many reasons, mainly because it's wonderful, overly expensive coffee. Maybe because you're lonely in the library and you just want a handsome stallion with a nice manecut and glasses to give you a smile and ask you how you've been. Or maybe books. The Inkblot is a wonderful place to read something light, like Hoofrace or Doevstrotsky. And occasionally, when it's a slow day, I can use a bit of light reading.

Today, I have Barn Burner with me. He's a weird one, but I can't help but love his work. So dark!

I haven't read much since I purchased the iced mocha that sits on my table, though.

So I look for a pony to watch. See, it has to be a particular pony. They have to catch my eye. They have to interest me. I have to wonder what their story is, and who they are.

I used to write, when I was filly. It's hardly surprising, really, considering how much I love the printed word. I'm obsessed, really. Enamored, like that stallion who accidentally sent Princess Luna a love letter. That was an interesting day.

But I'm rambling. I tend to do that. I get distracted. To and fro along the earth (where is that from?) until eventually I find my way back again.

I think tonight it shall be this pegasus. New in town, so I have never seen him before.

He's sitting in the corner like I am, in one of those old, comfortable chairs that every coffee shop seems to have, the kind that look well-worn and loved. He's got a strange cap

on... newsie? Is that what they call it? But he's reading. I'm struck with curiosity. What is that book?

I just wonder. There's no way I'm going to go ask him. That would spoil the whole "watching" part of the pony watching thing. And what is the point?

I'll take a moratorium on that one.

He's handsome enough. I decide he's reading fiction, probably of a more literary sort. Maybe not. That's the exciting thing, with other ponies. You never know. But for the sake of imagining, let's decide it's something... dense. It fits the vibe of the place.

I imagine—it's the point of the exercise, after all, to imagine. He's passing through, on his way from point A to point B. Maybe he's never been through Ponyville before. No, that's alright. But that's too cliché, too easy. Maybe he has been here before.

My pencil moves, roused to motion by the pull of my magic. I usually prefer quill pens, but when I come here to My Table, it's the pencil that I want. It's easier to change things. Easier to think in graphite. And maybe it's a little safer.

The paper I bring with me is folded into the book I bring. It's messy and chaotic, but I do this on purpose. It bothers me, how imperfect it is. I try to fix it, and the only way is to unfold the paper and take it out.

And then I have a bunch of paper. I guess I'll have to write something on it now, won't I?

So I do. What shall we name the stranger? I wish I could see his cutie mark, it would make this easier... no matter! I'll make one up.

Golden Ratio. That sounds... neutral, I guess.

I start writing, just some presumptuous introduction. Crap, basically. Setting the scene a bit, but not setting it too much. Golden Ratio, the lonely drifter, the meandering writer drifting from job to job... place to place...

He's basically Steinpony. Wonderful. My pencil continues moving, but my mind is parted in two between the words and that train of thought. It's an old adversary wearing a new disguise. It's the old foe of the Original rumbling, reminding me of one of my favorite sayings.

“Sub sole nihil novi est,” I whisper as I move the action and count the pages I have left. Seven. So fourteen in all left to work with. Excellent. Plenty of time for something short.

Golden Ratio of course has been here. He may not know it, sipping his mocha happily in that shabby chair, but he has. Oh yes, he has. And now he’s starting to think about one time in particular.

I run into an obstacle: I need a second player on the stage. Who? Barista. Why not? He’s cute, he’s nice... that’d be perfect. It’s fate. Or something. More like, it’s convenient to the needs of fiction and thus acceptable, I guess.

Ah... another name, for the cute barista. Why not something coffee-ish? White Russian, that’s a kind of coffee right? I don’t even care. It’ll fit. Besides, in the long run, his name doesn’t matter.

This is a story you’ll never read, Mr. Ratio.

So he’s remembering, on my page. He suddenly is reminded of a stallion he knew, and how they got coffee once. Talked into the night. How he had to catch a train. Gods, that’s stupid, but I don’t have much paper to work with, so it’ll have to do.

Why is he remembering it? He puts his book down, looks straight ahead. He just happens to catch the eye of the unicorn at the counter. Something about that face catches in his memory like a fly in a trap (Now there’s a terrible metaphor!) and slowly he tries to picture it without that little goatee... thing. It strikes a chord somewhere, and he puts two and two together.

That cute (he really is. I wish I was more like Rarity. I’ll just be sitting here, serving stories to no one) face finds him and freezes. There’s mutual recognition. They know each other.

Of course then come memories. A pretty classic technique for me. I overuse it, I really do, just stuff flashbacks into everything in the most pretentious ways imaginable. So here we go, memory:

He’d been here for a week and a half. No work here, nothing really that could hold him just a month but farmwork, and that was out of season. So Ratio lounged, talked, took in the nice valley air and the quaint rusticisms. A pleasant stay, and one brightened by the company of a certain somepony. They were fast friends, talking and laughing.

Another visit, and they met up again. He wonders... but it's just a passing thought. An errant feeling. He dismisses the way that White's eyes will follow him. He lets it slide how White will smile that strange little smile; he's shy, you know. Why? Well, it's strange and it's hard, doing things about what other ponies may or may not feel. Especially... that. Because how does he know? There's no way to look right into somepony and just know if that's what they're thinking. If they're like that. If they're like anything. And so he lets a moment pass when he could have said something. Anything.

Okay, memory is over. Back to the present and will you look at that! We wasted a bunch of space. Excellent.

Now comes the weird part. The part that's so... not true? No, that's not right. The part that's condensed. Because when you end a story you have to make it a small ending. All of the ending has to fit into a little word shaped box that you lock away. Mom used to say things like that, when she was still writing *Daring Do* and I was a foal. "It's gotta be snappy," she would tell me, grinning. It was one of her words. Well, I guess it still is one of her words, though the last *Daring Do* book she wrote was... gosh, was it three years ago? Such a long time she was writing those, all my childhood.

But the ending. I could make it a happy ending. I really should. I mean, why not? "Golden Ratio" hasn't done anything to me. He seems like an alright pegasus, in the... I suppose, twenty minutes that I've known him. Oh well, that I've looked at him and borrowed his likeness for a story about love or something. That sounds worse when I start talking about it.

What usually stands in the way of my happy endings is just... how life works. Simple things. I find simple, iron-like circumstances and smelt them down into chains. In this case, what can happen? It's not like White can just... leave. Ponies don't do that. They might do that in the stash of books I know Rarity has buried underneath her bed somewhere, but they don't in real life. Rarity's poor taste in literature aside, it would feel wrong.

But... then what? I'm stuck.

Today you're lucky, Mr. Ratio. Today you get your stallion. Or something.

It doesn't take long. It's a pretty stupid way to end a story, but I've only got two pages left. Ratio smiles, and White smiles back. Ratio gets up. It's all kind of on rails, isn't it? What you expect to happen, happens. He says "hi." The cute barista who honestly would

be mortified probably that I've written him as a blushing innocent says "hi" back. That's the point, that he decided to make that contact and just risk a bit. Hurrah.

And with a bit more, and some pretentious touches, I'm done. My quota for the day.

The paper goes into my saddle bag. "Golden Ratio" stands up, and to my astonishment, winks at the pony behind the counter before walking past me. I can't believe it.

"Uh, hi," I stammer out. He stops, and looks at me strangely.

"Hey," he answers, one eyebrow raising. I can see the book bulging out of his saddlebag and I grasp on it as a surefire way out of this awkward situation.

"I... just curious. I mean, about your book. What you were reading."

He grins, and unbuckles the saddlebag to pull it out. It's massive, paperback, with a beautiful cover.

"Lady, I think you'd recognize Kingstower when you saw him. I mean, the size alone! But yeah, I never finished these. I got real close... but just never did. I thought it might be a good time. Wanna see?"

Feeling stupid for having blurted out a greeting, but still interested, I nod. I reach out with my magic and take the book.

"*The Song of Sunflower*. Hm," I turn it over, to see a strange looking pony with... well then. It's not quite a unibrow, but goodness. I preferred the barista and this stallion. I flip it back over and hand it to him.

"Heard of it?"

"I have before. You hear names, working in a library."

And he's buckling his saddlebag up again. "Yeah, I remember that now. You're... Twilight Sparkle, right?" I smile, genuinely. It's nice to be remembered.

"That I am. Sorry, I was just curious, Mister...?"

"Raising. Raising Cane. Yeah, I know. It's silly." He chuckles. "But, nice to meet you, Miss Twilight."

And just like that, he's gone.

I do this regularly, writing at My Table. It's become more and more a part of me, now that my friends are busy. That's not really fair, some of it's me. Actually, a lot of it is probably me.

Applejack and Rainbow are still around town, it's not like they just vanished when they started dating. I mean, yeah, they make... kissy faces at each other, but not when I'm around. Well, when they're not being jerks about it, because they know it freaks me out. It's always Rainbow that starts it. Once she knows she's got a way in under your skin, she exploits it like there's no tomorrow. And so at some point, I know she's going to swoop in, wings flared out with no shame, and make out with Applejack mid-sentence. Rainbow is the best at what she does, and... well honestly, what she does is bother ponies, but I guess it would be more accurate to say she's making out. I mean, she might be good at that too. I don't know. I haven't asked. Somewhere, deep down, there's a voice curious as to the possibility of conducting some sort of scientific inquiry into this, but I crush that idea quickly. Nope. Moving on.

But I come here and I'll write a little crappy blurb, usually a bit of romance. It's easy. When I was young, I used to write all the time. There's probably still a box of notebooks from when I was a foal at home, filled to the brim. Adventure stories, most of them. I was just recreating Mom's books, really, trying to be her. It's pretty typical for foals, and so I'm not ashamed of them. But it's not what I want. It's not really quite who I am, writing those. Mom was a world traveler and has an album of pictures from her days as an Archaeology student at digs, brushing at potshards. She has a daredevil smile and one of those cool hats. Not exactly Daring Do, but it's still a lot more exciting than being a librarian.

But I'm just not the same. I'm not better, just different.

As I'm remembering, two ponies come into the shop. Or rather, one pony and a particular dragon who is not quite a baby anymore.

He's growing. It's nice to see him smiling with Sweetie. I'll admit, I'm a little jealous, but he had to grow up a little sometime. And Sweetie is a nice filly.

He doesn't see me right away, but when he does, he gives me a little wave. I smile and return the gesture, shooing him. Go have fun, Spike. Don't mind me.

Seeing them on their date reminds me of The Novel.

It's strange, and I think mostly it's because Sweetie reminds me of her sister. Rarity... Rarity was hard to resist, as an inspiration. My Diamond may not look quite the same, but she's all Rarity. Spike is nothing like Prism, but... I don't know.

And there it is. The Novel is back.

I've always had this story. Well, not always, but for a long time. Before I came to Ponyville it was sitting in my head, waiting. *To the Stern God of the Sea* was the title. It was the perfect title for me: something pretentious and smart sounding, like I just lifted it out of some dusty old book to sound important. Maybe I did, really. Why else would I name it something like that? It's from Hoofrace, one of my favorite poems, the one that goes:

Hapless they
To whom thou untried seemest fair. Me in my vowed
Picture the sacred wall declares to have hung
My dank and drippings weeds
To the stern God of sea.

I do have a reason behind the name. But, as always, I doubt. If I didn't know for a fact that my special talent is for magic, I'd assume it was for doubting things. I doubt Celestia's affection, I doubt everything.

Watching Spike and Sweetie smile and laugh together tugs at my heart.

I can't really explain it. It's not like I'm jealous. Maybe. It's just... maybe I've seen myself being like her. Smiling and laughing. Batting eyelashes at that handsome colt, hoping he smiles that smile. The one that I know means he likes me. Sometimes, it's Big Mac. Sometimes, Caramel. Thunderlane. Hay, the unicorn who lives on the square... Pokey or something. Day dreams in between book shelving days, really.

And I always had this scene. This one scene, and looking at Sweetie reminds me of it now.

It wasn't anything super amazing. It was just fluff, really. Prism and Diamond... okay, fine. My fictional Rainbow and Rarity, because I just... wrote them. I don't know why. It just happened, really. I needed someone for Diamond to love, and Prism—argh, Dash—had just started reading *Daring Do*. She was hanging around the library and it kind of just happened. One moment, I'm struggling, stuck on *The Novel*. The next moment, Prism flies into the story, bowls someone over, and loudly declares her presence.

But the scene was after all their confessions had been made, all the kissy facing and that stuff. And they were resting, looking out over the sea near Baltimore. Just... smiling.

The night I wrote it, saw it in my head and kissed life into it with a pen, Spike was at a sleepover and I curled up on my bed and cried. I'd never felt more ashamed in my life, but it's true. I was lonely, but I was still glad the colts from the school wanted Spike's company. It's good for him to have friends.

So it's not their fault.

Maybe it's The Novel's fault. The big story. It's about the end of the world, kind of. Post-Apocalyptic, what happens after the time when everything was supposed to stop and die. War, drama, love, intrigue. It's dark. Lots of ponies die, lots of ponies live. Some ponies are alone and some aren't. Some of them eat meat, because it's a desperate time. Some of them are good and a lot of them are bad. One of them knows he's in a story, and he goes mad. He sleeps and eats and fights in a haze, his mind travelling from tale to tale until at last he comes home. Because he likes his own story. He knows it's just a story, but he loves it and he loves the ponies in it.

That sounds so silly.

Spike spreads his arms out wide and flashes a big grin, and Sweetie laughs so hard she has to set her cup down, releasing it from the hold of her magic.

I stopped writing it awhile ago. I guess I was afraid of it. How it might actually happen and then I'd have to deal with it being alive. A little like how having a baby dragon was really neat, until it was me having to deal with him growing up. Crushing on a filly. Maturing. Mood swings? Nah, not yet, but maybe.

And maybe, just maybe, some of it had to do with the Princess. She knows I write. Sometimes, every now and then, she'll ask me about it. I always shrug and try to say something about working on things or... I don't know. Honestly, I try to sound clever without telling her anything at all. I guess it would be weird and hard to tell her that my life's work is a story about how she's gone and the world is dark and sad. It's so out of place.

I stuff my things back into the saddlebag and put it on my back as I stand. Time to go home.

I head out, throwing my drained cup away.

It's a nice day in Ponyville, with the sun going down below the horizon. Princess Celestia.

I think about The Novel again. I always do, when I leave this place.

—*Gray Eyes looked into the mouth of hell and grinned like the fool that he was.*

“Chekhooves’ Gun,” he explained happily, back at last in his own story. Prism could see his eyes returned to their old, familiar alertness. In the grip of his magic, he held the old Changeling bomb, the curiosity from the ruins of Canterlot that they’d used for light and heat, the strange device that no one could figure out.

The Lich Lord stared, not understanding. He squeezed the pony in his grasp a bit, and Gray Eyes groaned.

“It’s really quite simple,” the young unicorn explained as best he could. “Here, catch.”—

It takes me a moment to realize I’ve stopped dead in my tracks in the middle of the street. Bon Bon, the candy store mare, is looking at me strangely. I know I must be blushing as I scurry back home.

When I open the door, the library is predictably empty.

—*”Prism?”*

“Yes?”

She swallowed, and then looked Prism straight in the eyes. “You need to come home, you know that, right?”

“I know.”—

I sit heavily at my desk.

I unfold the papers and lay them aside. Maybe I’ll make it a real story one day. Truth in fiction, apparently.

I bite my lip, and then sigh. It won’t hurt to look at it.

So my magic summons it from its constant hiding place, disguised as a research journal. The safest place to be ever, really, as no one but I would ever care what was inside.

And with another sigh, I suppose that it can't hurt, getting acquainted with The Novel again. Even if it'll only ever be a story that no one will ever read.

Maybe as long as it's there and I know it happened, I won't feel sad when I see Sweetie—so like Diamond—enjoying the company of some young colt... or dragon. Or when Rainbow does some trick or kisses Applejack, I won't think of Prism and remember all that I wrote about her and what she did.

Idly, chuckling darkly, I scrawl on the top of the manuscript:

This is a story you will never read.

And meet them all again.